



Neville and Iris Thompson

You said that you were born here, Neville. Were you born on the property?

No, I was born in Cessnock, in a private home. They had a hospital in Cessnock in those days of course, but my grandmother was a bit of a midwife, you know - an old bush lady, and I was born in her house.

Did you come from a big family?

There were six in our family. I was the second eldest.

How did they break down between boys and girls?

Five boys in a row, and then a girl. My eldest brother was killed in a car accident in Cessnock when he was twenty three.

So that sort of made you the eldest then?

Yes. I was sort of left responsible for the main dairying and farming and things like that.

Was it your father who first came to the area, or his father?

My grandfather came here. There were six in his family - three boys and three girls, and Dad was the second eldest. They lived next door here - it was all one property then, split between two brothers. My grandfather took this place and his brother took the place down there. Uncle Toby was a baby when they came here and Dad was born here. After they grew up Toby went right up the head of the Dairy Arm valley and bought a place up there. Then as the others grew up they went away.

Uncle Harry went as a butcher to Broke. My grandfather was a butcher too. The first thing that I can remember is that he had the butcher shop and five or six acres of orchard. He looked after that and Dad dairied. My grandfather also was an auctioneer at Wollombi and he owned a set of yards there where he did the auctioneering.

And where was the butcher shop and the orchard?

The butcher shop is just down the corner there where you drove up. If you notice, the bottom side of the roof has still got the shingles on it.

Are they the original shingles?

Yes. Then he had slaughteryards up near where the bails are now and there's another little shed that's concreted and it's got cement troughs and that in it where he used to pickle all his meat. He used to do a run. He had a cart and he used to do Watagan, Yango, and he went out as far as Kulnura I think it was - they used to say he went "out on the mountain". But it wasn't every day. I can only just remember him when he was semi-retired with the butcher's shop. He'd probably kill once a week or once a fortnight or something like that. He quartered it up then and took it around to different ones. I can remember taking a trip with him when I was only four or so.

He retired not long after because Arthur Andrews started a butcher's shop at Wollombi and grandfather was getting on and they didn't want competition. He still did his auctioneering and looked after his orchard, and reared a lot of stock as well.

And where did you go to school?

Right up the head of the valley where my uncle was. They had five kiddies - four girls and one boy. They used to get a subsidised teacher to teach them.

Did he have to build a school up there or did she teach in the house?

There was a big long house - most of it was slabs, and they used one of the rooms for a schoolroom. The teacher lived with them. Some of the teachers we had would have just come out of college and it would be their first school.

When my elder brother was nine, one weekend he was going with Dad round the dairy cattle - bringing the springers in and things like that. His pony shied at a rabbit warren and threw him. He was hung in the stirrups by the foot and the pony went straight up the mountain dragging him. His foot came out about halfway up the mountain, but he was knocked out. When Dad got to him his leg was all smashed up around the thigh. Dad set him up a bit comfy and then went for help. Sid, the boy who used to help in the dairy, and grandfather got the horse and sulky and they went straight down the hill there and over the flat and whoever was driving was standing up, flogging the horse, and it's galloping! They had my brother propped up with pillows and stuff all round him.

His leg was broken that bad that they had a job to get it to knit. It started to knit crooked and they had to break it again and put a plate in it. They used to wheel him out to sit in the sun, and one day one of the nurses hit his leg on the door on the way out. He seemed to get a germ in it from that, so that meant they had to break it again and take the plate out of it. Then they wanted to take the leg off, but my parents wouldn't hear of it. He was nine months in hospital and I think it was about eighteen months before he could walk around again.

When all this happened I was forgotten about a bit. I did six months school up the end of Dairy Arm, then by the time my next brother was ready to start school Jack was able to walk, so all three of us used to go to Laguna school by sulky.

When us boys got a bit older we used to do a bit of rabbiting, because there were lots of rabbits around here. We made a bit of money, and Jack and I bought this car between us. He went to town in it one day and he was bloody killed in the main street of Cessnock, as I said. A bus had brake failure and drove right over the top of him.

Then there was Noel - he was two years younger than me, and Arthur, who was younger than Noel, and

then there was Rex, who was about twelve years younger than me. He was the lucky one, because us other boys all stopped at home to work but Rex was too young to ever have to. After Jack got killed and Arthur left school the three of us looked after the place - Arthur, Noel and I. Then Noel got married and he went away. Arthur and I got married in the same year, and Arthur decided that he was going too. Then Dad moved to Wollombi. Rex and Beryl were still going to school, so they missed out on all the work! (*Digression*).

I can't remember too much about grandfather and the butcher shop because I was a bit small. I can remember the orchard though. When I was about thirteen I had to finish ploughing the orchard for my Grandad with a mouldboard plough and a draught horse. He'd ploughed most of the five acres but I was allowed to finish it off to get the experience of ploughing. I thought it was great.

When you were going round those fruit trees you had to have a nice steady horse. We had seven or eight draught horses and I'd picked this one out - a beautiful mare she was. She'd do anything you told her. Anyway, I'd just finished ploughing this orchard. I was never a big boy - I was only just big enough to get up to the plough, you know, and when I'd finished and come home my grandfather said: "Don't let that mare go away with the others. Put her in the paddock here close because there's a bloke coming to look at her." I said to him: "You're not selling her! I won't plough your orchard ever again if you sell her!" He just looked at me and said: "You'll do as I tell you."

He was a bit tough was he?

He was a really good-hearted man, but he'd make you work, and if you didn't do what he told you he'd give you a toe in the bum, you know.

Anyway, it turned out to be Keith Fernance who came over to look at the mare - him and another chap rode over. I kicked up about this mare, but of course they didn't take any notice of me because I was only a kid. Keith was cutting timber over Yarramalong way and he was stuck for a horse. People used to come to this area because it had a reputation for breeding good horses, and he ended up buying this one. So away he went, and when he got to the top of the hill he turned round and looked back down to the orchard and said to his mate: "That poor little kid that ploughed that orchard - he's down there crying because I'm taking his horse. Will I pull the blinkers off her or not?"

But in the end he decided that he was stuck for a horse and that he'd better keep going - but he nearly came back with it. I suppose I didn't see Keith for nearly twenty years after that, and I was at a cattle sale one day and I bumped into him. He recognised me and said: "Oh, you're that little bugger whose horse I pinched!" That was when he told me how he thought he mightn't keep going with it when he bought it.

What sort of draught horse was that? An Australian Draught or a Clydesdale or what?

It was one of those Shire Draughts. See we had a draught stallion and we bred a lot of mares, and people used to bring their mares to the horse. Then we got a blood horse after that, and we bred a lot of stockhorses from that. They were only ponies, but they were built in the shape of blood horses. In those days we got a lot of our ponies from Matt Dehn and we crossed the blood horse with these ponies and we got some of the best stockhorses you'd ever ride.

Did you keep breeding horses like that for a long while?

Oh, for a few years, then we went more into the dairying. In 1948 we went over to the milk - before that we were just on the cream. You had to be out of bed at three o'clock to get your milk on the road down here for the pick-up at seven o'clock in the morning. We were milking 68 cows and there were only three boys to do it. Once us three boys were old enough to do it, Dad didn't go to the dairy - he looked after the beef cattle.

Anyway, we'd just started into the milk when the '49 flood came. With the rabbits and the wombats and

the wattles round the banks of the creeks, the heads of the valleys tore right away. I've got a bit over two mile of the valley coming through the middle of my place here and there was four foot of sand came down right over the top of our gully. It filled all the waterholes up and moved the creek channels to different places. It used to be paspalum and white clover flats, with nice little waterholes all the way down it to about half way, then it was a sandy creek. When the heads broke - and there's acres and acres of ground up there, it left it so that down here you could only see the top six inches of the fenceposts that were still showing.

It must have been heartbreaking.

Oh... it ruined this place. You take from Lou Nichols' place right through to Laguna - there's no waterholes any more. There used to be the biggest waterholes! You could sail a boat from that gate down there nearly to Laguna House, and there's nothing there now. (*Digression*).

Before my time they used to take the pigs to Maitland by horse and cart with a pig net over them, and it was nothing to drive pigs along the road from here to Laguna.

Someone else mentioned those nets. What were they made of?

Rope. About four to six inch mesh. You tied it right round your cart so they couldn't get out. Grandfather had a four wheeled wagon - I can't remember whether it had a pole on it, or shafts. I think it would have been a two horse one because the front wheels were lower than the back ones...

This relentless milking routine and early rising and all that - is this why your brothers ended up shooting through ?

There wasn't enough land for us all to keep going here, you know, and me being the eldest one I sort of...

You didn't mind being the one that stayed?

No, not really. I cut a bit of pit timber in the slack times in between, and during the winter.

So you did a bit of timbergetting ? There wasn't that much done around here was there?

When I bought the place here I didn't have much when I got married. When I went to buy the place, Iris' brother was a timber man who'd cut a lot of timber around here and he had a sawbench. He came in here with it - him and another couple of chaps - and they cut all these baulks and half-baulks on the sawbench. It was all for the mines, and I got that bit of extra money from it to help pay the place off. I bought the place in 1967, and in 1968 the dairies all disappeared. Now there's only Lynch's left, up at Watagan.

Why did they go all of a sudden?

Well, the bulk pick-up came in. That meant that you had to have all-weather roads. I used to get blocked down here near the gate. And you had to put vats and everything in, and it was all too much outlay. I'd borrowed money to buy the place, so I put cows on it, but I didn't have much income when the dairying went, so I cut a bit of timber and I grew watermelons.

That's heavy work, isn't it, pulling watermelons? Bet it kept you fit.

Well, with all the heavy lifting right through from when I was a kid to doing the melons, I got a bit of back trouble. All the cushions between the bones are damaged and have got spurs and things growing on them and in the last three or four years I've had to give the melons away.

So all that hard work and exercise doesn't so much make you fit as make you crook!

I suppose... (*Pause*) But we used to have a lot of fun when we were kids. There were families above us and around us. Most of them worked on their places and we used to get together and go riding and...

Did you get up to mischief?

Oh I suppose we did. Like all kids - you know.

It seemed a common thing to have big families in the early days, but this became a problem when it came to splitting up the land between all the kids - because the holdings became too small if everyone got a share.

Yes. With us three boys I bought the other boys out - (*Digression*).

And how did you meet your wife? Was she a local girl?

Well, it was a case of marrying the girl next door. Iris' family originated from out near Gungahlin up the Hunter. He was a share dairyman, and he went down the south coast, and to Penrith, but he finished up dairying next door and that's where I met her. She was a real country girl, reared on farms all her life. I think that's how I came to be able to pay the place off and to manage today, because she was alongside of me every day of the bloody week. She'd come and help me in the dairy, she'd come and dig postholes alongside of me, jump on a horse to help me yard cattle, and drive the tractor around. She never worked machinery in the paddocks or anything like that but she could drive a tractor with a towline or a trailer or anything like that. She's been as good as a man to me...

I was only four when I had an accident and lost this finger. (*The right index finder*). I lost it in the cogs of a chaffcutter. It was an old capstan one with a pole right through it and you'd hook a horse to each end. There was a big intermediate cog that would drive the chaffcutter flat out. Dad always tied it down so you couldn't move it, 'cos the big cogs were dangerous where there were kids around. He must've been in a hurry one day because he went off without tying it. He'd always warned us not to go near it or to touch it, but you know what kids are like. The elder brother was pushing it around, pretending he was a horse, and I'm saying to him: "You know we're not to touch it. Dad'll flog us if he finds out!", and I grabbed a spike to jam it into the cogs to stop it. The cog sort of gave a jerk and grabbed my hand, ripped off my finger, and smashed it to halfway up my wrist.

So what did they do? Race you to Cessnock?

Well Dad had gone out on the horse after cattle. There was only Mum and someone else there. My brother grabbed me and brought me down to the house, and poor old Mum! There were bones and sinews everywhere and it was all smashed. She grabbed a plate and laid my hand on it to try to hold it. Then she rang Laguna. There were very few cars around then, but Bill Brown, who had the wine shop at Laguna had an old one, and he came tearing up here. Just as he got here we could see Dad coming around the mountain on his horse, so we cooed to him and he came galloping over. He just jumped off the horse and jumped into the car and away we went! They saved the joint, and knitted the bones in the wrist. In those days they used to have to clean it out with a lint sort of thing, and they used to get a prod - a needle sort of thing - and they'd shove it all the way up into my hand. I used to scream and scream. They never put me out for that. There were two nurses and Mum there holding me while they drove it up and pulled it back out. It was to drain it. I can remember 'em doing that, and from then on I was sort of claustrophobic because every time they used to put me in a room on my own I used to panic.

Gee! And I suppose that took a while to get better?

I can't remember now how long I was in hospital, but Mum had to stop with me.

It didn't make you become left-handed?

They tried to make me, but I was useless left-handed. So I'm a bit of a slow writer.

I've had a few bad accidents. When I was eighteen we used to have to get up to milk before daylight, and I was out at the wood heap boiling water for the bails. I split a piece of stringybark that didn't separate

completely, and when I knicked the splinter that was holding it it flew straight up in the air and hit me right in the eye. I grabbed the splinter and thought I'd managed to pull it out, but oh hell! it was hurting. I went on milking but it nearly drove me raving mad. As soon as it became daylight I raced down to the house, but when I asked Mum to see if there was something still in it she couldn't see anything. But I could still feel something!

The elder brother and I had an old car between us at that time, so he ran me in and took me to the eye specialist who found lots of fine splinters in it They put drops in it, then they put a thing in it that popped my eye out on my cheek. They're working away on it, and talking - and I'd only had drops! Anyway, they nicked it and put dissolving stitches in it, then they put my eye back in. I was in hospital for about six or eight weeks. They bandaged me up - both eyes, and I was like that for about three weeks. After that they took the bandages off to see if I could see out of it, but I couldn't see a thing! It had scarred over and taken my sight in that eye. And now the other one's starting to get weak.

I had another accident in 1988. I nearly got drowned. I think it was in '78 we had a good flood, and it dumped another lot of sand over our flats. We used to get locked in here a lot, so they came with these square sort of concrete pipes - about four foot by two foot, and they just dropped them on the bloody sand there, with stones and stuff in between them. They didn't set them in properly and they tended to block up easily with the rubbish and that. Anyway, we were boxed in by this flood, and getting a bit short of tucker. I'd rung the Council, but they said they couldn't do anything till the water went down. They didn't care too much because I'm the only one living permanently in the valley, see?

I went down to check it, and on the end of the pipe there was a bit of a pole thing sticking up, with all rubbish collected around it. There was only about a foot of water over the road, but it was really coming down! It was just driving and tearing, and had washed all the top off the road, and these big boulders were all exposed. I had a pair of rubber boots on, and my lumberjacket, and I was hanging off one of these big rocks, reaching out to give the caught pole a bit of a shake, you know, to let the rubbish go from around it. The bloody thing broke! Right down level with the rubbish that had caught on it. You couldn't imagine the pressure of the water that was coming through there! When the stick broke, before I could let it go, it tore my hand from off the rock and pitched me out into the creek. It had been washed out to be pretty deep at that spot and I went under. I had my rubber boots on which were full, of course, and they would've been the heaviest part of me, I suppose. It sucked me straight into the pipe, and as I was going in I grabbed the top of the pipe, but it ripped my grip free. I thought then: "Well, that's it. There's no man could go through this pipe". It was only two foot in depth, and five pipe lengths long, and each pipe was all higgledy-piggledy and not put in straight. I just relaxed, and thought it was the end of me. I just gave up. I knew that if I struggled I'd be worse off, and the pressure just sucked me through.

It seemed like half an hour, but it only would have been a few seconds. My head was bashed against this and that, and I could feel it tearing at everything, and I came out the other side. I went through it on my back, but as I came out it must've flipped me over onto my stomach. Iris, my wife, had run to see where I was, and she was standing there when I came out, yelling. She couldn't see any sign of me. I was like an old frog - I was down under the water, and when the pressure came off and I knew I'd come through, I kept going to come up, but every time I did the bloody thing'd suck me down again because it was rolling so much. I had to go with the current nearly down to the other Dairy Arm stream before I got out of the pressure and was able to scramble out. I got out on the bank and I just flopped, you know. I'd had it! The wife raced around and I told her that I was alright and had only had the wind knocked out of me. The clothes were torn half off me, and she was keen to get me straight home, but just at that moment along came the Engineer from the Council, and I wanted to go and see him, even though I was like a drowned rat.

"When are you going to lay some decent pipes or something here?" I said to him, "It's ridiculous to have these little bits of pipes for all the water that's coming. I just went through it!" When I said that he went

as white as a sheet, and he looked over and said: "Well, there could be a lot of people might go in there, but there'd be only one came out alive." See, it was the ups and downs in the pipes the way they'd been laid - I'd had to go through five lengths of pipe which weren't properly lined up. It must've just sucked me through on my back. If I'd rolled over I'd probably have jammed in there.

Did it take you long to get over it?

I went to bloody bed that day. I couldn't get my car out so I couldn't go to see any bugger, so I laid down. I was terrible bloody giddy and that, and when I came out here from the bedroom I just collapsed. I ended up having to see the doctor, who said I was all bruised and cut around, and he gave me some painkillers but they didn't seem to do much good. I finished up going to the chiropractor, who told me that I had seven discs out in my back from my neck down. I'm still having trouble with my neck. I'm having disc problems all the time - though sometimes it's as good as gold. I still go and split a few posts, and ride my horse around and do all the farming and that. I've got arthritis as well these days, but I find that the more I keep moving the better I am.

And these outbuildings all around. Were they there when you were a kid?

All of these buildings bar the feed shed up the top were.

Would they have had shingle roofs to start with?

No. I think the butcher shop and the meat room were shingled, and probably that stone place at the back there. We had the dairy, the orchards and the butcher shop in the early days. This was the Post Office here, too. It was called Yallambie.

Do you know how it got that name?

I don't know. A lot of these names are blackfellers' names.

You've got "Mount Auban " on the gate...

That's the name of this property. It's been that as long as I can ever remember. I don't know where the name came from. I can't be absolutely sure about things in those really early times. You hear your parents and your grandparents saying things, and you put little bits together from here and there and later when you grow up you try to make it all fit together, but you mightn't always get it quite right. My grandfather's mother was a Fernance - so they must have been friendly! So I'm related to the Fernances too, you see.

Keith's mob came from St Albans. Did yours too? No, ours came from Sydney. My great grandfather was Matthew George Thompson, and my grandfather's name was John Arthur Thompson. (*Digression*).

We didn't get about much at all. We had a lot of fun, and we mixed with all the ones around here. When I lost my eye at eighteen I couldn't play much sport, because I had no judgement for a long time, though I developed a fair bit later on. I sort of dropped out of that side of things, but I still went to the dances. We'd ride nine miles to Wollombi for a dance - a heap of us, not just on your own. We all made it a party when we went to a dance, and then when the vehicles came in someone'd have a ute or a cattle truck and we'd all pile in. Wollombi dance was once a fortnight. We used to go out as far as Kulnura, and there used to be little homes that'd have a dance sometimes.

Were there many parties and things?

Yeah. Nearly always dance parties. For ninety percent of the people dancing was the way they all got together. There'd be a heap of the men going to cricket, but the dances were for everyone.

In your Dad's time, given that everyone was so self-sufficient, can you remember whether they grew their own tobacco?

Well my grandad never smoked at all, and he never liked anyone smoking, but a lot of them grew their own tobacco and made sort of plugs from it. I dunno how they done it - it was sort of rum, and brown sugar and stuff like that, and they used to press it. What started me smoking was after I done my eye in. They told me not to read much while my eye was getting better. I'm not much of a reader at the best of times, so I ended up having a smoke to give myself something to do. Of course no-one said anything about smoking being bad for you in those days.

I suppose with so much farm work to do you didn't get much time for hobbies? Did you go shooting much?

Oh yes. Grandfather was a pigeon shooter. It wasn't clay then - they used to shoot real pigeons. He started when he was only fifteen. His father used to take him to the shoots and he was a real good shot. Dad has told how they'd go out and let these pigeons out, and whatever you shot you kept for yourself. Dad and Uncle Toby and his brothers used to have to collect them all up and their job was to pluck and clean the buggers! Then it went on to the clay pigeons. I think they still have them at shooting clubs and that, but it's no longer done around here.

...My cousin Ken Thompson in later years had a dairy down there where you turn in to Dairy Arm. It was quite a big dairy and he needed a share dairyman to help him keep it going. Not long after I left school his dairyman left him and he found himself in a bit of a spot. I went and worked for him to help him out and ended up working in the dairy for twelve months - I was only about fourteen going on fifteen. That was before we'd gone from cream onto milk here at home, but he was on milk.

We'd have to get up at three o'clock in the morning because the milk lorry would come up three days a week, but it only went as far as Wollombi on the off days. On those days we had to put the milk into a spring cart and run it down to Laguna House to the dairy there, and they'd load it with their milk and run it to Wollombi. So you'd be up at 3a.m., then you'd be ploughing all day in between milkings. He had two big cement silos there for the feed. He grew it all. You'd cut the cornstalks with a canecutter, load them on to a slide or a dray, then run it through the chaffcutter. Then an elevator took it up into the silos. In the wintertime you'd open them up and shovel the feed out into the trolley, and push it down through the stalls and fill them up. In the afternoon you'd fill the stalls before you started milking.

When you ploughed you went till it was nearly dark, then you'd go home for tea. Then you got a lantern and went back to the silo to shovel it out with one of those big coke forks they used to use in the pit. I used to be buggered when I finished.

You'd be in bed pretty early then?

Well, sometimes you'd still be doing the stalls at eight or nine o'clock at night. I did it for twelve months. Every second Sunday I'd come home for lunch after I'd milked in the morning, have a couple of hours there, then go back again for the afternoon milking. I'd come home to have dinner and I'd drop off to sleep at the table. Dad decided that it was too much for me, that I was too young, and he brought me back home. Not that my cousin worked me particularly hard - it was just what you had to do on a farm in those days.

What's the story with the house down here on the main road where the turn off to Dairy Arm is? Is that an old house?

That house has been done up. I don't think you'd say it's an original home any more, but that's where my great grandfather lived. When he first came here and it was all one property then, that was where his house was. They had stables there then, and when the coaches used to come through from Wisemans Ferry that's where they changed the horses. Then they went on to Maitland.

I wonder how they kept track of whose horses had been left where?

Well I haven't been told enough about it to know. But Wollombi in those days was a big concern. There was something like four or five hotels there. There was no Cessnock then - it went Wisemans Ferry, Wollombi, then Maitland. When my great grandfather came there, my grandfather was four, they tell me.

It must have been bloody rough then with no cars, no phones... You had to rely on yourself for everything.

Yeah. Even in my time, ninety percent of the time you never wore boots or anything. I can remember I used to prune the orchard, and those old plum thorns - you could get 'em inches long, you know. They used to pile the prunings in a heap and burn them, but somehow there must have been some left in the track. At Christmastime, cousins and that'd all come out to the farm and get together, and we used to go down to the big waterhole for a swim. I trod on this plum thorn, and it went straight through my foot. It poked the skin on the top about half an inch up - never broke the top of the skin. I came hobbling back and they got a pair of fencing pliers and pulled it out. I had a sore foot for a while!

What'd they put on it?

Turps. *(Laughs)*.

I'll bet that hurt!

Well, it didn't hurt any more than it was hurting!

Before they got silted up, the waterholes that were here were pretty big then?

Well, there were some deep ones around, and Dad wouldn't let us go in them when we were little, but there were a few little places we could go in for a swim. And we used to fish. In the early days the old grandad went into Maitland and got little fingerlings of fish. He had to travel of a night-time with them so it'd be cool, you know. He put them in from Laguna right back up to here so you could go fishing.

What were they? Perch or what?

Mainly perch I think. But then the mines started up, and after a while some of the miners would come out here with gelignite, but that was killing all the young fish and everything doing that. Grandad had stocked the creek off his own bat - it took him bloody days, I suppose - and he reckoned he was ready to go and shoot the bastards. "I did it for the people of the district," he said, "they've only got horses and sulkies to go around in and those that don't play cricket might like to go fishing." He was very upset when they began to come in and blow them - he always chased them off.

Once the creeks were well-stocked, did you fish for them with a fishing line, or use nets to catch them when you wanted to? You didn't ever stick traps in or anything?

Oh, a bit later on, in my time, when the big holes were here, the perch used to get pretty deep - you had to fish pretty deep to get perch, though you'd get the mullet up around the top. Anyhow this chap Harry Brown - he had three sulky rims that he wired together to make a trap. He'd drop that down around the big holes and get some perch. But you weren't suppose to do that, of course, even though it was on your own bloody property - he only used to put it in when he wanted a feed of fish. Then of course others used to like to go and sit down on the bank and fish, you know.

What'd you use for bait?

Oh...they'd get little frogs, or crickets. And for mullet you'd throw a little bit of pollard to them for a while, then you could get them on a bit of doughy bread

Neville, it seems to me that compared to Yarramalong the church seems to be more important to the community round here. People seem to go to church more here than they did down there. Was the church a part of your life?

Yes. The Church of England church there at Laguna. My grandfather used to take us young ones to Sunday School there in the early times - he was a churchwarden and all the rest of it. People then from all over the district used to come in horses and sulkies, and then the odd car, when cars came in. It was a Sunday event that they all turned up to. They used to have a bit of a pow wow after church, you know, and most of the people that were that religion would go. Then there was a Catholic church at the mouth of the Watagan, and the Catholics would go there.

And everybody would be something, would they? Were there any atheists amongst the community?

There might've been some, but the majority of people ...well, they brought their kiddies up to go to church.

It was a bit of a social centre then as well as a religious one?

Yes. That's right. I don't think it hurts anyone. I think everyone should have some sort of religion - believe in something, like... *(Pause)*... Yes, it's different here to Yarramalong in other ways, too. This area was mainly dairying and mixed farming and a bit of timber, where Yarramalong was mainly timber with a little bit of dairying. My Dad had a bullock team, and he cut timber. They built the dairy in '26 - that was the year before I was born.

But now, what farming that is done is just cattle?

Oh ...up until the last three years or so I grew melons and farmed. We grow crops for the cattle, and all our own garden stuff. But nearly all the properties are chopped up now, and they're only weekenders now, the majority of the places.

The whole usage of the district has changed, hasn't it?

Yes. There used to be big families reared off it once but there's more or less nothing produced off it now.

Mmmm. I suppose in your day, when you were young you'd probably know just everybody that was around, but these days there's so many people coming in...

Yes. We used to go to work, and when you knocked off you'd downed tools and left everything alongside of where you were working. You might leave them there over the weekend, and you'd come back Monday and there wouldn't be a thing touched. Today when you knock off you've gotta bring your tools home with you and lock them up!

Did you have a big family yourself?

I had four - a girl and three boys. The girl was the eldest, and when she left school she went to Bonds clothing factory. She was a machinist there till she got married. She does a bit of dressmaking and that still now. She's got three kids.

When my eldest boy left school I couldn't afford to pay him to work here with wages the way they are today, so he worked for the solicitor next door who had 1700 acres out there at that time. He ran the farm for them for five or six years or so.

The next boy, when he was ready to leave school, he couldn't get a job here, so he went into Cessnock and boarded with his sister and got a job there with Lifeguard Tire Service. My youngest boy took Colin's (the eldest) job looking after the 1700 acres next door when he left there, and he's still doing it.

He lives over there in one of the two houses up on the top side of the hill where you turn to come in here.

And did you say that Colin's back at Laguna now?

Yes. He's got 100 acres or so there. He does contract fencing, and I suppose he looks after about sixty

percent of the cattle in the Wollombi district for all those who have bought little properties and have got cattle on them. He manages all those for them - he's a seven-day-a-week feller.

Did your kids marry people from around the area?

Well Valmai married a boy from Cessnock - he worked in the Post Office. Colin married a girl who came from Sydney. Andrew married a girl from Cessnock, and the youngest boy's not married. I've got eight grandkids. (*Digression*)

Tell me, Neville, have you had any more terrible accidents you haven't mentioned?

Yes, as a matter of fact! I was about twelve and I was pulling fruit in the orchard once. We used to drive the cart around, and there was this big old plum tree that I climbed up to pull the fruit... I'm up this tree with a bucket - and the limb breaks. Down I come through the tree, and one of those plum tree thorns I was telling you about went right into my leg. Straight in it went, and straight underneath my kneecap! I came home, but we couldn't get it out - it was all in too far. Dad wasn't keen on poking around at it in case the point broke off and I'd get a stiff leg from the bit left in there, so I went to the doctor, and he couldn't get it out either. I had to go into the hospital and they cut it out. When they got the bloody thing out it was three and a half inches long!

You've still got plum trees then?

Yes, but they're just about bugged now. The orchard's just about done.

Do you reckon you've had more than your share of unlucky accidents?

Oh, I don't know if I was born under the wrong star or what. I've had a lot of falls off horses and things like that - been knocked out by falls. See Dad had been a horsebreaker - when he was a young feller he used to break in a lot of horses. I was telling you before about the horses we bred - a lot of them were bad bucking buggers, and Dad would only mouth them and that. He wouldn't put Jack on them because he'd had that broken leg and they said that if it ever broke again it'd never knit. So he used to get Lou Nichols' brother Hersel over to ride them two or three times, because he was a pretty fair rider - then Dad'd throw me on. Then when I got to be about sixteen he'd mouth them and I'd ride them - and I had a good many busters! But I rode a good many too.

So you had to have a lot of strings to your bow back then, didn't you? You couldn't specialise.

There was orcharding, market gardening, timber, and pigs. We had a lot of pigs when we were on the cream, but when we went on the dairy they went out. We had ten or a dozen breeding sows, and a boar. And we'd grow corn and stuff in a 15 acre paddock we had up near the mouth of Murray's Run. We'd bring it back in a horse and dray, and we'd need two draught horses in front of the shafter to come up this hill on the way home! In our big shed we had a bay at each end, up off the ground, with the centre one at dirt level. You'd stick your corn in there, and it was a night-time job to husk it.

A family job?

Oh yes. Anyone who was big enough was in the corn sheds. If you were little, after a while if you were cunning enough you'd bury yourself down in the husks and go to sleep.

What'd you do with all the husks? Plough them back in or what?

No. Next morning you'd be taking the horse and dray back to pull more corn, so you'd load the husks into that and drop them in the paddock where you put the cows and they'd eat that of a night time. Then when we got onto the milk we used to work a lot of ground and grow corn and the old saccolene - that's a variety of sorghum.

Is that still grown these days?

I've got a paddock out there now that they're just starting to feed off.

It grows big, doesn't it?

About eight foot high, I suppose. We used to make silage. You'd dig a big round pit, put two slabs across it and bolt your chaffcutter onto that - you'd have a stationary engine to run it off. You'd cut the corn stalks with a canecutter, load 'em onto slides and drays and drive 'em in and chaff it up into the pit, and then you'd bring your old horse around and lead him round and round the pit, tramping it all down. You had to keep it tramped as hard as you could so there wasn't much air in it...

So that's what stopped it breaking down like compost!

When we first started off there were no tractors - it was all done with a horse. Then when we got the tractor we got a little forage harvester. It was a six or seven man job because you had to put a fair bit in at a time and fill the pit quick, otherwise it'd go mouldy. We'd pull a little trailer behind the harvester and throw in things like cowpeas and that, and we packed it down with the tractor. We'd spread some of that Sisalkraft over it, then put the dirt over the top.

When we went to open it in the wintertime to feed, we'd clean it back for as much as we wanted for, say, a week. And it would have set like a plug of tobacco. I used to have a squaring axe, and you'd get up the top of it and cut it across with the axe, then fork it down into the trailer and take it to your stalls to feed through the winter.

The first bloke to make silage around here was a bloke called Noble up at Cedar Creek. Then Ashley Slack at Slack's Bridge there on the way into Cessnock, he had a little farm there and he started. We were still boys, but we were interested in doing it, so I went down and I worked with him filling the silos, and got an idea of how he did it, how he tramped it and all that. Then we came back and us boys dug pits and...

So you found out about this sort of thing by word of mouth, then? There was no information being put out by the Department of Ag, or... ?

I don't know how this Noble bloke came to do it, but that was going back in the very early years. There was Noble, and Slacks, and us, and that was just before Jack got killed, so I would have been about seventeen. Jack went over to Crumps in Watagan and helped them dig their pit, and showed them how to do it because you've got to have some drainage, you know, and you've got to build it the right way.

Did it work first time, or did you have to learn by your mistakes as you went along?

Well our first one was a good one, and we dug a couple of others that didn't come out quite as good, but we found with them that we didn't have the right drainage.

Do people still make silage these days?

Not so much since the dairies went out. It was the dairymen that begun that, because the silage would hold the condition on the cattle. You'd grow a lot of oats and feed them that too, and it was a good balanced diet.

What did they do for winter feed before silage came along? Was that when they had to keep the hills well cleared for winter feed to grow?

You've still got to keep the hills cleared ... They're all saying that the old fellers cleaned these hills too much, but I don't think so. They had to make a living. They had big families and they made a living on this and they reared their families. They had to clean the hills. They only cleaned it right out in places, but most of it was only thinned out and they left timber there, because the majority of the people were timber men. They only cleaned the rubbish out, which let the light in, let the grass grow and the remaining

timber grew twice as fast - and straighter. Like I said before, Dad had a bullock team and he cut timber right up to 1926, and there were other timbermen here taking timber after him. When I bought this place there was heaps of timber here. I took timber off where they'd been, years afterwards. But then the '78 flood came and silted everything up and I had to sell nearly half of my cattle. I had to go out and cut timber and grow watermelons and that to make ends meet, and today my boy's contract fencing and he's still cutting a lot of timber off here. I think there's just as much timber here as there was when I was younger. A timberman doesn't go in and just cut everything as he goes. He sorts the timber out, and he knows what he's doing, and in five years' time he's got better timber than when he started.

Mmmm. Thinning'd have to be helpful, you'd think.

Oh yes, it's got to be done. You go and look at some of these places now where I know they run a lot of cattle on, and she's been cut up and there's nothing been done in the last ten years. There's no grass on it now. And the birds and animals have got nothing to feed off there now. If we put a crop in we've got crows, and white cockatoos and that all eating everything. We never used to have much trouble with wildlife.

It's got worse, has it?

A damn sight worse. One poor bugger down at Laguna there said: "The only thing I can grow is something under the ground!" You're not allowed to shoot this that and the other and you've got to have a licence and you can't shoot on another bloke's property or anything like that. That's made it hard for the bloke that's trying to make a living on the place.

(Digression).

Years ago we used to grow a bit of tobacco. You'd burn it around hens' nests and places like that to kill the lice. This is in the days before the sprays and things they have today. It was the same with garlic. We used to grow garlic because we used to get blackleg in our calves here.

What's black leg ?

It's a disease that young sucking calves get. It might be the best young vealer on the place, and it'd get blackleg and die. When he dies you know it's blackleg because he goes black in places, like around the nose. He'll blow up pretty quick, and if you just run your hands along his ribs it'll be all bubbly and crackly underneath. We used to have to inoculate them, like we inoculate them now, so we'd grow garlic. You'd slice off a little bit of garlic and make a little pocket between the skin and the flesh in the brisket place there, and shove the garlic in and leave it there. It used to go all through the animal and kill the germs.

Do you grow garlic now?

I've got a bit of it out there. Of course later they got a black pill, and then after that they came out with another vaccine that you can just needle them with now.

You wouldn't go back to the garlic treatment though ?

No. I mean, it mightn't have been quite as good as what they've got today, but that was the best we had in those days, you know.

You said earlier that you'd put turps on cuts and things...

And you'd buck around a bit, too! I don't know if you can buy the pure turps now, but it was marvellous stuff. It'd take all the soreness out - all the germs...

Now was that mineral turpentine or the oil of turpentine that I think you get from the turpentine tree ?

I couldn't tell you, but they called it turpentine.

It might be a bit like ti-tree oil, d'you think?

An old timbercutter said to me once: "If you cut your bloody self with the axe you jag the axe into a turpentine tree and when the juice comes out you fill the cut up with it." So he used it straight out of the tree.

They used to go on working, didn't they? It didn't matter what they'd done to themselves...

No, you didn't go and lay down, you just kept on moving around. I don't know if they realised, but it was probably a good thing that they kept moving around - like when I was in hospital one time, I was in for eight weeks before they let me out. Today you can get your guts cut out and they've got you walking around in two days! I think you've got to get up and keep moving around to stop clots of blood and all the rest of it, so maybe they knew what they were doing when they kept going.

What about ti-tree oil? Ti-tree grows round here doesn't it?

Oh well, I don't know if it's the right one - there's that many kinds of ti-trees. There is a scrubby sort of ti-trl-e grows around here but I don't know if you'd get the oil out of it or not.

You said that your grandmother burnt either wattle or oak in that bread oven outside. I understand that oak is the hottest burning timber we've got around, that the bakers in the early days all used to prefer it as a fuel...

Dad said that when he got big enough it was his job to cut the wood. They used oak, but if they were running short of oak they had to use wattle. Wattle has got a lot of heat, and it burns quick, but it makes a lot of white ash too. That'd heat all the bricks up in there, and then they'd put the bread in and heap the ash all over it. When it came out and you brushed the ash off the top it was as clean as a whistle, you know.

It's built of bloody great sandstone blocks. How do you reckon they would have lifted them into place?

You go and look at any of these stone places around, like Laguna House - they never had cranes and things like that to lift those blocks. The convicts built them.

Do you think they would've used a block and tackle?

They must've done something like that - or pull them up on skids and slide them into place. There were some blokes that came out in the convict days who were very good tradesmen.

I suppose lifting big weights like that would have been a skill and an art...

Oh yes.... Speaking of horses, there were heaps of bloody saddle horses here - and we used to go riding around the mountains and into places, and mix with the kids, you know.

Would the girls do this as well as the boys?

Some of the girls used to, but mainly the boys. Some of my cousins used to come down from up round the Gunnedah area, and they'd be in the yard, and helping us milk, because they'd never done any of that because they came from wheat and sheep country.

Girls didn't ride side-saddle though, did they?

No. Not in my time. My grandmother always rode side-saddle. She was a Bailey from St Alban's. Dad and them told us that when they were just little babies she'd go to see her parents and she'd ride from here, and if she had a baby she carried it with her on the side-saddle all the way to St Alban's on the

horse.

Was that a harder way to ride than astride? I mean, could you gallop that way?

When I was a bit of a boy there was one of her old saddles here that I can remember. Once I put it on a horse and got onto it. Well, what an awkward bloody way to ride! You're sitting skew-ways on the saddle, you know. See those days the ladies didn't put jeans and slacks on to ride - they had them big skirts and things then. My mother's mother - she rode bucks and all side-saddle. But in my time it was always the ordinary saddle they used.

Would you go really long distances up in the hills on your horse?

If you go up the head of this valley you're in behind Will O' Win and the Yarramalong valley and all that. It was the uncle's place and when his boy moved up north it was sold to a Sydney feller. I used to look after the cattle for this Sydney bloke, but there were no fences between his place and the Crown Land and I used to have to ride out nearly to the bloody Basin yarding cattle.

They lose many?

I suppose they lost a few occasionally. A lot of the ones from Brush Creek and parts of Yarramalong, their cattle used to come back in there too. You'd be riding out there and you'd see horse tracks where they'd been out looking for their cattle. But people were pretty honest in those days - they'd draft their cattle off and take them back, but they didn't touch anyone else's. Not like today.

(At this stage Iris joins us).

(To Iris) Neville says you came here in your early teens.

Iris: I was about thirteen when we came here. I went to Laguna school for a year or so, and my brothers went to Cessnock High School. They had a long day. They caught the bus at seven o'clock in the morning and it was dark when they got home.

Whereabouts did you live when your family came here?

Iris: Just down at Ken Thompson's there - on the top side. My father was a share farmer. Before we came here we'd been at Castlereagh for a year, and we were on the south coast before that, in the war years. I was about eleven when we left down there. The place at Castlereagh was only a little one, and you had to milk by hand, and Dad wasn't too happy with that. So he looked around and we ended up coming here. He stayed here then till he retired - well, he semi-retired - he went to town and went into the chickens for Steggles. He did that till he was seventy one.

After I left school I worked on the dairy till I got married - for about four years I think. My maiden name was Dehn - we were of German descent on my father's side of the family. My mother was of English descent - a Cox. Actually she was descended from the feller that put the road over the Blue Mountains - William Cox.

Neville: When they first settled this area around here they grew wheat. They had a flour mill and a bakery at Wollombi. But they found out that wheat wasn't suitable for here, because the rust set in. It was a bit too moist. We grow a lot of oats for the cattle, and there used to be a lot of rust came in - you can get it in oats too. But now you can get a lot of strains that are resistant to it.

What would you say were the main ways that farming practices have changed since you were a kid?

Oh, our methods have probably changed a fair bit.

More artificial fertilisers?

Well, we used to use fertilisers from as far back as I can remember. If you don't use a bit of fertiliser you can't grow much in this country here.

Did you have super in the early days?

We had superphosphate, blood and bone, sulphate of ammonia...

How'd they spread it?

We had horsedrawn spreaders. It was a direct drop, like. It had starts in it that would turn with the cogs on the wheel.

Same basic principle as the ones you'd use these days?

Well you'll still get the odd one with the same start in it, but they're a funnel type now and they're driven by the power take-off on the tractor. They spin and throw it out the back. The old ones just had the row of starts along, say six foot wide, and you'd put your super in it. When it came out there was a board or a sheet of metal of some kind that ran along and when it fell on that it spread evenly all the way along.

What about seeding? Is that still much the same?

We used to have old corn droppers. The single dropper was a horse following the furrow, whereas today you'd have a three point linkage one. Instead of going along with a mouldboard plough and then going along behind with the dropper, these days you have a little foot on the front of the dropper and you're drilling and dropping all at once.

The first I can remember, if you were wanting to sow fine seed like lucerne or clover, you had a dish where you'd mix your seed up with a bit of sand, and you just went along and broadcast it with your hand. That was the first. Then they brought out a little thing we used to call the Fiddle. It had a little box on it with a spinner, and a handle that you worked like a fiddle bow. It'd throw the seed out three feet to each side and you'd walk up and down the paddock with it and it'd look like you were playing the violin. They were quite good. I've got one in the shed now still, and if you were only doing a little piece I'd still use it.

Would you say things have got easier?

Oh, a lot easier. You'd have to go and bring your horses in - harness them up, and away you'd go - and you'd be walking behind those horses all day long. Now, you walk out and kick the tractor over and away you go, straight into your paddock. With a tractor you can plough as much as you'd plough in three days or more with horses. And when you're sitting on a tractor, it's not like when you're throwing a single furrow plough around at every end. When I was little - thirteen or fourteen - I wasn't strong enough to throw it around. I used to lay it over and let the horse pull it round, then straighten it up quick to start the next row.

(To Iris) What about the domestic scene? Electricity made a difference, did it?

Iris: Oh yes. I found the washing was the worst. Before electricity you had to get the wood, boil up the copper, and all that. It was pretty hard.

Did you do much ironing in those days?

Yes. We had those old petrol - Shellite - ones that you'd warm up. They had a little reservoir on the back and a pump. They weren't much good, so I'd only be ironing what I had to.

What about the fiat irons that you used to heat up on the stove ?

No, I didn't use them. Neville's mum did, and I suppose my mother did too, but I never used them, even though I'd seen them around. It was a bit strange because when we were at Castlereagh we had electricity

there and had got used to it, but when we moved up here we missed it - especially for the ironing, actually, which is where we missed it the most. Having to go backwards wasn't too great.

Was yours a big family when you moved here?

No. I only had two brothers and another sister. I was the eldest and my sister was the youngest. The older brother lives at Cessnock, and one sister lives at Emu Plains and the other brother is at Wilberforce. He's the brainy one of the family. He went to England and did a university degree there. He's always studying something.

What do you think will happen to here eventually?

Neville: I'd say it'd be all cut up. I'm going to leave it to the kids. They love the land but I don't think it'll be enough for them all, and I don't think they'll buy one another out because the price of land around here today is too much if you're going to buy enough to try to make a living off it. They'll probably sell it and put their money into some other going concern. People these days want to get out of the city to have the country life, and they can travel back and forwards to the city from here and still keep their city jobs. That's what's ruined it around here. Well... I say it's ruined it - but the city fellers probably think they're in heaven!

But the prices have changed so much. Dad bought 800 acres of Reserve and I think he gave ten shillings an acre for it. This was when I would have been a baby. You could go to town then and do all your shopping with ten pound. But what would ten pound buy you today? You'd buy your tobacco and come home!

When you killed your own, did you use up all parts of the beast?

When you killed for yourself you only had fresh meat for two or three days - the rest had to be corned. They used old wooden wine casks to pickle it in. You used to have to boil it up and throw away the first lot of water to try to make it less salty. And you only kept the liver and the tongue and a few things like that if you were killing for yourself - the lights and the insides would be thrown away. But when grandfather was butchering, all the intestines would be stripped and cleaned out and boiled and washed, and he'd use that as the skin for the sausages.

Iris: That'd be an awful job!

You never had to do anything like that?

No, thank goodness! I don't do liver these days, but occasionally I might get a bit of corned tongue. We used to have an old kerosene fridge that was pretty good, and we'd keep as much as we could in there. In summer it'd really ice up.

Neville: When we killed we'd share it amongst the family, because you couldn't use the full beast yourself.

Iris: Then you'd often buy a sheep, and there was always a pig or two around.

When you killed pigs, to make bacon and ham wasn't just a matter of pickling, was it? That's smoked isn't it?

Neville: I haven't done it, but Dad and Grandfather used to. It'd be wintertime, and after it had been in the pickle or something like that - I'm not entirely sure about the process - they'd hang it out in the sun for a bit and then they'd light a fire in the old wash house at the back and hang it up on hooks inside and smoke it a bit. But he didn't have a proper smoker. Even if you don't smoke it it'll preserve. Grandfather just used to have a safe with gauze sides, and he'd put it in that and it'd last all the winter. And I don't think you'd taste any better bacon anywhere. It was better than you buy today because they always castrated their pigs. They don't do that in piggeries today because they think they grow too fat - they feed

them on grain all the time. And when you kill a boar and make bacon out of it you can tell he's strong.

And castrating made it taste more like the bacon you'd get from a sow, would it?

Yeah. It wouldn't be as sour. To get a decent side of bacon you've got to get your baconer from about 80 to 120 pound. Now that's a fair lump of a pig, and if he's a boar, by then he's getting a bit rank.

Iris: And it's a bit heavy getting him in the bathtub to get the hair off, too.

How do you go about doing that?

Neville: I have a bathtub, and I have a copper of hot water boiling. I've got it to where I put two gallons of cold water to six of boiling water in the bathtub. Then, when you've got him stuck and ready to go in, you put your water in, pick the pig up and put him in and roll him around... and the hair will just scrape off as clean as anything.

Do you do that with a scraper?

Yes. I usually get a little bit of spring - anything like that. Or you can just pull it off with your hand.

At this stage the carcass isn't yet cut up?

No. You do that when you've got the hair off him. You hang him up and clean him then - you dress him, as they say. I used to hang him up overnight in the cold butcher's shop on a cold winter's night, and in the morning he's set like anything and you can cut him all up.

And did you learn how to do that pretty early on?

Well, if you put a knife through in the wrong place, you can lose a lot of meat. After Grandfather sort of gave up, Dad used to do the butchering, but we'd always be up at the dairy when he was cutting it up the next morning so we never saw it done much. I just got books, and asked different things about how you did it. I'm not saying I'd be a good butcher, but I can cut up reasonably well.

...You said you were going to have a talk to Steve Lynch. He could probably go back further than I could. He was one of those fellers that worked a lot in the timber, and he was a great one for mortising posts and putting up split rails and things like that. He did some terrific fences like that. Lou Nichols is about the last one that I know that could still put up a good fence - though my boy's doing it now, too.

Did you have much to do with Steve Lynch over the years?

Oh, I've known him all my life. I knew all the people from up Watagan Creek.

Iris: When I was a young girl the Lynches were great tennis players. They had a tennis court up there... The remains of it are still there.

Iris: Yes. They always had tennis going. If they weren't playing there on a weekend they were playing somewhere else locally. Steve used to encourage the young ones playing...

Neville: They were good-living people - hardworking and good sportsmen. They played cricket, too. And they used to like cards - they'd go around all the euchre parties and that. I don't think they went to dances much - the girls might have, though.

It always seems different by road, but if you go cross-country Watagan Creek is straight over the ridge from here, isn't it?

Neville: Yes. And Murray's Run is the same in the other direction. There used to be half-time schools in both Watagan Creek and Murray's Run and Dairy Arm, but that was before my time. All Dad's family went to Laguna School, bar the two youngest girls. When they were young he built a little school here for

them, and got a teacher for the two girls - a governess - for while they did primary school. And that's when my uncle met the teacher here and ended up marrying her! She was from Glen Innes, and I think she might have been teaching at Wollombi before she came here.

The McKays were telling me that when you went to the dances you didn't leave the hall once you were inside until you were going home. Is that how you remember it?

Well, the boys and girls respected each other very well in that way. You went to the hall to dance. No running outside and carrying on or anything like that. They were all pretty strict.

Iris: Your mothers were there to keep an eagle eye on you mostly. In my case, you never went unless the parents took you, so they were always there anyway.

Neville: When my older brother Jack was old enough to go to the dance on his own I was allowed to go with him - though Mum and Dad took us along at times. We'd ride horses then, or we got a lift with anyone who might have had a vehicle around.

...My grandfather was one of the first in this district to have a motor car - a big Buick, but I wouldn't like to say what model it was. Dad learnt to drive it, but my grandfather never did - he was a real cattleman, and not at all mechanically-minded. Being an auctioneer, if he went down the road he looked at everyone's cattle as he was going along, and when they were trying to teach him to drive he was always looking out the window at the cattle! So they told him they wouldn't teach him to drive because he'd only kill himself, and grandfather got out of the car saying: "The bloody thing! All it does is make a noise. I wouldn't want to drive it anyway!" He'd say: "I'll go and catch the horse and sulky. Bugger that thing!" He was funny. Dad used to drive him around, but if he took him somewhere and had a puncture he'd get out, and wouldn't even help Dad to change the tire. He'd say: "Oh, I'll walk on. You'll catch me up." That was his way, you know.

Iris: Didn't your grandfather ride a horse across the flood at one time?

Neville: Oh yes. When the big floods come, this valley's covered with water. One flood grandfather had a bull over in a little paddock over the other side and as the water rose he got more and more worried about him. He wanted us boys to go over and let it out. There were bloody logs and all sorts of things coming down in the flood, and while we could swim you wouldn't call us real good swimmers, so we wouldn't be in it. Grandfather got cranky and went and caught his horse and went across himself in the pouring rain and let the bull out - the water was running deeper than the horse's belly and it was quite dangerous. He would have been about seventy then - though he was a big built man.

Iris: It can get a bit dangerous on that flat because if a big flood comes it can trap the cattle in. I've walked across holding on to the fence to open a gate to let them go up onto the hill or something. But mostly the floods come up in the night time when you can't do much about it anyway. Sometimes we used to get the dogs to go across and force the cattle into the water, and bring them across to you.

Neville: But you always had to take your dog a couple of hundred yards upstream from where you wanted him to cross, because he'd be getting washed down by the current as he was swimming across. I had one dog that was really good - she had brains! She'd swim across and bring the cattle and force them over, and come back herself swimming beside the last beast upstream. I think she might've had more brains than me!

I suppose you've had a few dogs over the years?

Oh yes, I've had some really good dogs. When Iris and I were on our own we had one and we used to move the cows back onto the mountain of a night time, and in the morning I'd just have to give that dog a whistle and he'd round up and yard all the cattle while I was up the dairy getting the fire going and putting the machines together. Sometimes he'd only bring half of them and you had to send him back

again. But if you sent him back the second time the bugger would stop out all day till he found the cattle because he wouldn't come home without them.

Iris: It was always a bit of a rush come milking time. You had to have the milk down at the pick-up point at seven o'clock of a morning, and then you had to have it down there again at half past three of an evening - to catch the lorry. If you were late starting, you still had to go at that time, and just take what you had.

They wouldn't wait at all?

Neville: Well, they might wait a few minutes or so, but it was too big a run. Hal Nichols used to come out of Murray's Run, I'd run down with mine, and the dairy down here - Ken Thompson's - they'd be there. Then it went to Dick and Pat Sternbeck's at Laguna House, and then it had to go right up Watagan, and back to Payne's Crossing a bit, then they had to pick up right down through Millfield, and then they had to take it straight through to Hexham. There were fifty or so dairies round Wollombi at that time - fairly big dairies, too.

Iris: And as well as those on milk there were the ones one cream as well. Nearly every little place had some sort of a dairy on it.

Neville: A lot of them were mixed. If they only had small places they'd milk a few cows, and grow vegetables, and do a bit with the timber or something - if you missed out on one you might make up for it with the others, you know. You didn't have all your marbles in one bag.

Iris: We'd often see the big timber jinkers going out from up the valley with the big logs on.

Neville: In our time there was machinery and big trucks and that, but in the days when Dad was cutting timber he had a bullock jinker. He used to cut his logs and have to get them to the mill at Sweetman's Creek. He used to use the bullocks and wagon. Since I've grown up I've often wondered how long a trip like that would've taken him, but you don't think to ask things like that when you were a kid, so I don't know.

Iris: When we were young, the cattle that were sold at the Wollombi sales they used to drive from there to Maitland.

Neville: In my grandfather's time everything was drove by horses along the road. When he was getting on a bit, he leased Charlie McKay some of his yards to sell from - he sort of started him off. The sales used to be on a Thursday, and when Jack and I had grown up a bit, after we'd finished the milking and the cleaning up and that, we'd grab our ponies and instead of going to school we'd ride right on by and go to the sale! Grandfather and Dad never said anything, because we got in and helped them do all the drafting and that. It was like a picnic to us - we loved it. But you'd wait till after half past nine before you galloped past the school and hope the teacher wasn't looking out of the window!

We never got into trouble because Dad used to say: "Oh well, they might've learned as much today as they would've at school." He thought we'd end up on the land, and that we were learning something useful. But we couldn't go off and play with other kids or anything when we were there. We had to go and watch the sale - we had to take it seriously and take notice of what was going on.

Even when we did go to school, often we were late. All the kids had farm work to do before going to school, and it wasn't all that unusual to be late. But we always used to make excuses. We'd say the pony got away, or that we lost a cow or whatever - often they were true, but we also made a lot up. There was one teacher who kept a list of our excuses, and at the end of the year he gave it to us and said: "Here. Take that home and read it!".

Iris: I reckon it must have been hard ploughing and working the ground in the summertime on those red hot days, you know.

Neville: We used to grow about fifteen acres of corn there on the Murray's Run side. Dad would drill it, and Jack and I would have to drop. When the corn got up a bit Dad used to take us around there and we'd be scuffling corn. This is around Christmas time and just after, when it's really hot, and you'd get in amongst those green stalks and it seemed to draw the heat, and the old draught horse'd be sweating. You'd have your boots off and you'd be jumping all the time onto the freshly turned ground so you wouldn't burn your feet. We only wore shorts. If you kept your boots on they'd only fill up with dirt, and you'd sweat. As soon as we got onto the ploughed ground we kicked our boots off. Then a bit later on Dad got a disc plough with a seat on it - well, we thought we were made, then!

Iris: When we were dairying, if we had to go to town we had to be home in time for the afternoon's milking. That meant you had to be home by one o'clock, which meant you only got a couple of hours to do all your business in town. You'd whistle the old dog to bring the cows home while you were getting changed! (Pause)... You wouldn't want to go back to those days would you!

Neville: Well, you couldn't today. Things are in too much of a rush now. Time didn't matter in those early days before the dairy. What you didn't get done today you'd do tomorrow. We worked hard, I suppose, but you didn't have to bust your guts. But you couldn't do that once the dairying came, and you certainly couldn't today, because everything is running to time.
